DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 225 411 FL 013 461

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TITLE Facilitating Beginning English Second Language Acquisition in the Elementary School.
INSTITUTION California Association of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages.
PUB DATE 82
NOTE 13p.; In its: "CATESOL Occasional Papers," Number 8, p.72-83, Fall 1982; For related documents, see FL 013 455-463.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Education; *English (Second Language); Grammar; Listening Comprehension; *Oral Language; Second Language Instruction; *Second Language Learning; Speech Skills; Syntax

ABSTRACT

Views on the role of speech in the early stages of English as second language (ESL) acquisition are discussed in relation to experiences with elementary school children. In examining the roles of speech and grammar in the early stages of ESL acquisition in an English speaking elementary school environment, six types of expressive language were observed in children acquiring ESL in a natural environment: silence, immediate imitation without context, immediate imitation with context, delayed imitation with transferred context, syntactically broken independent speech, and syntactically unbroken independent speech. It is suggested that beginning levels of ESL instruction should involve comprehensible input and sequenced unanalyzed wholes appropriate for each student's acquisition level, and should teach expressive English for interaction with native speakers of English. (Author/RW)

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ED225411

FL 013 461

California Association
Teachers of English to
Speakers of Other Languages

CATESOL Occasional Papers
Number 8 (Fall, 1982)

FACILITATING BEGINNING ENGLISH SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

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This article discusses some current views of second language acquisition and relates them to the writer's experience with elementary school children learning English as a second language. Specifically, the article examines the role of talking and grammar in the early stages of English acquisition in an English-speaking elementary school environment.

The writer suggests that in this environment beginning levels of ESL instruction should teach expressive English for interaction with native speakers of English and sequenced unanalyzed wholes appropriate for each student's acquisition level as well as give students lots of comprehensible input.

The purpose of this article is to discuss some current views about second language acquisition and relate them to this practitioner's experience with elementary school children learning English as a second language. Specifically, this article will discuss the role of talking and grammar in the early stages of English acquisition in an English-speaking elementary school environment.

The role of talking in early stages of English acquisition

Should we teach non-English speaking children new to an

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English-speaking environment to speak English?

Krashen (1981) distinguishes between comprehensible input and incomprehensible input in receptive language. He postulates that in a second language speech emerges with sufficient comprehensible input.

Terrell (1981), applying Krashen's hypothesis, has had success in teaching English to English-speaking adults in an environment where English is the majority language. He points out he can teach more of the target language faster by concentrating on receptive communication rather than expressive communication. He recommends that elementary school ESL teachers concentrate on receptive comprehensible input rather than expressive language so that students can begin to make use of sources of input outside the ESL classroom.

Terrell's experience differs in several significant ways from that of an elementary school teacher's: 1) He is teaching adults, not children. 2) He is working with related primary and target languages. 3) He is teaching a foreign language, not a second language. Nevertheless, he makes a good point about the effectiveness of teaching receptive language without the encumbrance of expressive language. There are many ways the elementary school ESL teacher can teach receptive language: lotto games, total physical response (Asher, 1977; Segal, 1980), picture books which match meaning and language (Moustafa, 1980), and songs which match meaning and language, among other things. In all of these activities, the English-speaking model does the talking in conjunction with context and the student simply receives meaningful information about the language without the stress of talking.

Does speech play a role in second language acquisition when students have the opportunity of a natural environment? Fillmore (1976) compared the acquisition of five Spanish-speaking children, ages 5 to 7, learning English in a natural environment. She discovered that the child who most interacted verbally with her English-speaking peers acquired English faster than the other children studied. McLaughlin (1978) summarizes Fillmore's findings this way:

> Within 3 months the English of one of the children -- as measured by well-formed and varied sentences -- had developed beyond the point it would for two other children at the end of a full year of naturalistic exposure. By the end of a year, the child who progressed most rapidly could speak English nearly as well as monolingual children, whereas the other two children would need an additional year of exposure to reach this level of proficiency. (pp. 108-109)

Fillmore believes that the differences were not due to native intelligence but to social and cognitive strategies. In regard

to the social strategies, Fillmore hypothesizes that by interacting with English speaking children the socially aggressive non-English speaking child received more contextualized experience with the target language than the children who were not as socially aggressive across language groups. Hence, the socially aggressive child acquired the target language faster. Fillmore suggests the child did this by giving the impression with a few well chosen words that she could speak the language. She used this language to keep herself involved in the English-speaking group.

The child Fillmore studied who acquired so rapidly stimulated her own comprehensible input, in large part through the use of expressive language. To her, speech was not only a result of comprehensible input; it was also a tool for stimulating more comprehensible input. Can we help other ESL students use speech to maximize their comprehensible input outside the ESL class? First, let's examine the different types of expressive language ESL children use. I have observed at least six types of expressive language in children acquiring English in a natural environment:

1. silence
2. immediate imitation without context
3. immediate imitation with context
4. delayed imitation with transferred context
5. independent speech, syntactically broken
6. independent speech, syntactically unbroken

These categories are not, of course, a description of developmental stages. They are merely an analytical clarification of "talking."

1) "Silence" is the lack of speech displayed by an non-English speaking child when the child first arrives in an English speaking environment. This "silence" is normally specifically due to a lack of experience with the English language, not a lack of experience with language. In my experience, the non-English speaking child can immediately mimic a specific contextualized experience in English provided it is not too many syllables and emotional trauma is not blocking the response. Hence, I prefer to view "silence" as a state or degree of inexperience with English. How long that inexperience lasts and to what degree it lasts depends on each student's experiences and auditory memory and the state of the art in teaching ESL.

2) "Immediate imitation without context" is the type of speech which occurs when we ask a newly arrived non-English speaker "What's that?" and the reply is "What's that?" It is employed

in the audio-lingual method and in the recitation of nursery rhymes and songs taught without context. Many native speakers of English, unaware of the associative aspect of language acquisition, confuse this type of speech with language acquisition. This parroting of language confuses native speakers who often respond to the meaning of the utterances, not knowing that the student is merely parroting sounds.

3) "Immediate imitation with context" is the type of speech which occurs when receptive language and context occur together. It is the language which occurs when an English-speaking child pulls an object from a non-English speaking child and says "Mine!" and the non-English speaking child responds by pulling the object back and saying "Mine!" It is employed in children's play and in meaningful interpersonal interaction.

4) "Delayed imitation with transferred context" is the type of speech which occurs when speech which has been observed and/or imitated in one context is recalled and employed later in another similar context. It is the language which occurs when the non-English speaking child in the example above walks up to another child several hours later after the above experience and grabs an object from that child and says "Mine!" I have observed this type of transfer occuring quickly with a few socially aggresive children with good auditory memories. Presumably, the child Fillmore studied who acquired so rapidly had good auditory memory. However, most children need many, many receptive experiences with each word or phrase before they can independently recall the word or phrase at a later time.

5) "Independent speech, syntactically broken" is the type of speech which occurs when we say "Drink your milk" and the child responds "Me no like." The child has understood the message and generated his/her own response to the message. Another type of broken syntax occurs among some children whose first language is an oriental language. We might hear "He is taking three book." Occasionally, especially in the intermediate grade (ages 9 to 12), acquirers with this type of speech have as much -- or nearly as much -- vocabulary as their native English-speaking peers as measured by the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (the PPVT).

"Independent speech, syntactically broken" is the type of speech many adult native speakers instinctively correct in communicative situations without realizing how it discourages the acquirer from wanting to communicate in English again. Linguists do not view this type of language as incorrect, but the way the acquirer understands the language at that stage in his/her language development. A skillful teacher in a communicative situation with the student will focus on the meanings conveyed, not the grammatical "incorrectness."

6) "Independent speech, syntactically unbroken" is the type of speech which occurs when the child who is told "Drink your milk" in the example above replies, "I don't like it," or "I

don't want to" or "You can't make me." It is the end result of many contextualized receptive experiences with English. In my experience, non-English 5- and 6-year-old children with this type of speech have usually acquired as much vocabulary as their native English-speaking peers as measured by the PPVT, while 9-to 12-year-old non-English children with this type of speech may or may not have as much vocabulary as their native English-speaking peers. A child with this type of speech who does not yet have as much vocabulary as his/her native English-speaking peers may not be identified as a limited-English student because he/she "sounds good."

"Independent speech, syntactically unbroken" is the type of speech with which the regular elementary classroom teacher is most accustomed to working. Many elementary classroom teachers who are unprepared to work with ESL students typically approach the initial oral language development of the non-English speaking child the same as they do the language development of the native English-speaking elementary school child. With the best of intentions, they typically ask the child a question the child cannot understand, much less respond to. Consequently, the child feels threatened and the teacher feels frustrated and inadequate when the child does not reply.

It is now generally agreed that the second type of expressive language, "immediate imitation without context," is inappropriate for language instruction. The fourth, fifth, and sixth types -- "delayed imitation, transferred context," "independent speech, syntactically broken" and "independent speech, syntactically unbroken" -- are all dependent on previous experience. The third type of expressive language, "immediate imitation with context" is useful in helping ESL students achieve the fourth type of expressive language, "delayed imitation with transferred context."

How can we teach "immediate imitation with context"? Krashen suggests that for language to be acquired -- to become part of the student's unconscious system of communication -- the focus of language instruction should be on something other than the language itself and that the message be comprehensible and of interest to the student.

In the following example, context serves as both the focus and the mediator of the meaning of the language being taught:

> The teacher is sitting in an instructional circle with two to eight non-English speaking children. Through gestures or gently manipulating a child's hand she gets one of the children to hit her hand as she extends it toward him. Once she has succeeded in getting herself hit, she immediately exclaims "Don't!" and pulls her hand back with mock indignation. She extends her hand to another child to hit it and again with mock indignation

exclaims "Don't!" while pulling her hand back. She repeats the interaction several other times moving from one child to another. Soon the children are freely (sometimes too freely) hitting her hand as she extends it, giggling as she keeps repeating "Don't!"

After many repetitions, she changes the dynamics of the interaction from receptive to expresive language. With a smile on her face, she gently hits one of the more aggressive children and waits for the child to say "Don't!" If he doesn't say "Don't!" she coaches him to say "Don't!" Keeping her hand on the place she has "hit," she says "Say Don't!" In the rare event the child does not respond, she gives an expressive opportunity to another child and/or returns to the receptive interaction described above. Soon each child is responding "Don't!" as he is being mockingly hit. Giggles abound. The language is meaningful to the children.

Once each child has had the opportunity to be "hit" and say "Don't!" she expands the context. She pulls a student's hair and coaches him to say "Don't!" and then goes on to tug sleeves, push chairs which students are sitting on and gently pull shoe laces, not stopping each annoying activity until the "victimized" child says "Don't!" Laughter abounds. The children are totally involved. The total instructional time for this activity is three to five minutes.

The teacher goes on to another interactive activity. She abruptly points to an object across the room behind the children's backs exclaiming "Look!" She gently turns the heads of each child who has not turned his head to look. She then abruptly points to something on the ceiling while exclaiming "Look!" and again gently turns heads that are not turned in the direction she is pointing. She continues pointing to objects in different places, near and far, exclaiming "Look!" each time. Soon all the students' heads are turning in unison to the various objects she is pointing out.

After many repetitions one of the children may change the dynamics of the interaction from receptive to expressive language by pointing to something and saying "Look!" If a child does that, she immediately responds by looking in the direction the student indicates. Given this encouragement, the other children may follow course and begin saying "Look!" themselves.

If this does not occur spontaneously by itself, she will change the dynamics of the interaction from receptive to expressive language by gently taking the arms of a child and guiding him to point his index finger at something and coaching him to say "Look!" Keeping the child's finger in an extended position, she says "Say 'Look'!" As in the case of teaching "Don't!" if the child does not respond, she gives an expressive opportunity to another child and/or returns to the receptive part of the interaction. Soon each child is exclaiming "Look!" and she is happily on her way to getting a neckache from turning her head too much. In future instructional sessions she will expand the target language to "Look 'it'!", "Look 'it' that!" and "Look at that!" This activity has taken three minutes of instructional time.

She returns to the previous activity. Without saying a word she pulls a student's sleeve. Silence. Despite the total involvement of a few minutes ago, he has forgotten how to say "Don't!" So has the rest of the group. She says "Say 'Don't'!" The student quickly responds with an enthusiastic "Don't!" and they take up where they left off before. (Moustafa, 1981)

In the above examples, each expressive event is preceded by several meaningful receptive experiences. This might be symbolized as

$$C\text{-}R_{(Don't!)},\ C\text{-}R_{(Don't!)},\ C\text{-}R_{(Don't!)} \longrightarrow C\text{-}E_{(Don't!)}$$

$$C\text{-}R_{(Look!)},\ C\text{-}R_{(Look!)},\ C\text{-}R_{(Look!)} \longrightarrow C\text{-}E_{(Look!)}$$

where C = context, R = receptive language and E = expressive language. The contextual-receptive $\longrightarrow$ contextual expressive sequence reoccurs with <u>each</u> new part of the language learned.

In the examples above "Don't!" and "Look!" will have to be reviewed in several subsequent instructional sessions until the students have committed them to long term memory. Younger children will need more repetitions in more instructional sessions than older children. (Hence, the desirability of grouping by age.) Once the students have had sufficient experience with these segments of English, they will be able to retrieve them from long term memory and use them in interacting with their English-speaking peers. This in turn will facilitate the students' ability to obtain more comprehensible input from the English speakers in their environment.

The role of grammar instruction in early stages of English acquisition

Should we teach non-English speaking children grammatically sequenced materials?

Krashen suggests students acquire structure by understanding messages, not by focusing on the form of the input or analyzing it. The message is understood through context, extra-linguistic information and general knowledge.

In his "Natural Approach," Terrell focuses on the message, not the form. He has found the method successful in teaching Spanish to English-speaking adults and recommends the method for teaching English as a second language. He gives teaching demonstrations of the "Natural Approach" to English-speaking adults in Dutch and offers the following as an example of possible "comprehensible input" for beginning English as a second language students:

> This is a pencil. It's a yellow pencil. Who wants the yellow pencil? (Picking student who has raised his/her hand) Do you want the pencil, Melissa? Good, here you are. Thank you. Now, class, who has the pencil? Does Melissa have the pencil? (Most of the class will say Melissa) Yes, that's right. Melissa has the pencil. (p. 128)

Is this method of teaching English equally effective with all language groups? English is closely related to both Spanish and Dutch. It's not difficult for an English speaking adult to comprehend Wat is uw naam?[1] in Dutch through language transfer. Would Tên ông là gì?[2] in Vietnamese or ismak a[3] in Arabic -- where there is virtually no overlap in vocabulary or syntax -- be as easy to understand? Would speakers of non-Romance languages with no English experience comprehend through Terrell's method as rapidly as speakers of Romance languages? The question is important because approximately half the children now acquiring English as a second language in many California elementary schools do not speak Romance languages.

Fillmore observed the following cognitive strategy leading to syntax acquisition in the children she studied: First the children acquire formulaic expressions and use them as unanalyzed wholes. (Other researchers call this "holistic" learning or learning "chunks" of language.) Then when the children have a collection of such "unanalyzed wholes," they begin to see the recurring parts of the formulas. When the children discover which parts of the unit may be varied, they can then make novel utterances.

Fillmore's subjects had to rely on the random language samples in their environment and good memories. They were on their own to relate one "unanalyzed whole" learned in one context to another "unanalyzed whole" learned in another context. It is possible in ESL instruction to arrange lesson objectives to help

students understand the parts of the whole. Here is an example of how it can be done while focusing on the message, not the form:

The teacher is working with a small group of students with an oral receptive English language age of about 2½ years as measured by the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test. She has pictures of various foods. She licks her lips, pats her stomach, points to herself and then to one of the foods while saying, "I like that." She repeats the gestures and language with a few other pictures of foods.

Then she puts the pictures in front of one of the students and asks "What do you like?" The student points to one of the foods. She coaches him by saying "Say 'I like that.'" The student points to one of the foods and says "I like that." She gives each student a turn to say what he likes.

The teacher turns to pictures of various animals. With a cooing voice she says "Ooooh!" and then pointing to herself and one of the animals commonly liked by children she says "I like that." She repeats the gestures and language with a few other animals. Then she asks a child "What do you like?" The child says "I like that." She gives each student a turn to say what he likes. The activity has taken about four instructional minutes.

The teacher takes a box of objects and puts it between herself and the students. She holds a hand puppet up at her side, turns her head toward the puppet so the students see only her profile and talks with the side of her mouth toward the students closed. By opening and closing the puppet's mouth as she talks it appears that the puppet is talking. The puppet says to the teacher "What do you want?" The teacher points to herself and to an object in the box while saying "I want that." The puppet picks up the object with his mouth and gives it to the teacher. The puppet and the teacher repeat the sequence a few more times.

The teacher turns to a student and asks "What do you want?" The student points to an object and says "I like that." (The student is using the previous "unanalyzed whole.") The teacher guides him to say "I want that" and gives him the object. After each student has had several turns to request an object and gets it, the teacher guides the students to say "I want that" to each other and get the objects they want from each other. The activity has taken four instructional minutes. The teacher is now talking to a colleague who has come into the room but the

students are enjoying the activity so much that they continue on their own telling each other "I want that" and getting what they want from each other (Moustafa, 1981).

In the examples above the students learned a three syllable phrase as one unit. This might be represented as:

$$C\text{-}R_{(Ilikethat)}, C\text{-}R_{(Ilikethat)} \longrightarrow C\text{-}E_{(Ilikethat)}$$

where again C = context, R = receptive language and E = expressive language. The students then learned a second three syllable phrase as a unit:

$$C\text{-}R_{(Iwantthat)}, C\text{-}R_{(Iwantthat)} \longrightarrow C\text{-}E_{(Iwantthat)}.$$

Some of the students may then begin to see (Ilikethat) and (Iwantthat) as (I-like-that) and (I-want-that). If they don't see it this session or when this lesson is repeated in subsequent instructional sessions, they will have many other opportunities to abstract the parts from the whole when similar "unanalyzed wholes" are sequenced together. In subsequent instructional sessions the teacher might create context for such unanalyzed wholes as the following:

"I need the ____"; "I have the ____"; I see the ____".

"I don't like that"; "I don't want that"; "I don't have that."

"They see that"; "They need that"; "They eat that."

In the examples above the students may not have understood the parts of the first unanalyzed whole but they understood the message through the context. When the second unanalyzed whole was introduced they understood the message through the context and had enough information to begin to abstract the parts of the message. The sequencing facilitates the abstraction.

I'm not suggesting we use grammatically sequenced materials in the traditional sense. Rather, I'm suggesting a new type of grammatical instruction -- instruction where we intentionally sequence some of the comprehensible input to facilitate the natural acquisition of syntax. This will further facilitate the student's ability to decode and to create novel utterances which will in turn increase the potential amount of comprehensible input the student can derive and stimulate outside the classroom.

Should unanalyzed wholes be sequenced by skill difficulty as well? That is, should we teach "Look!" and "Don't!" before we teach "I like that" and "I want that"? Should we teach "He is throwing the ball" before we teach "The ball was thrown"?

Krashen says:

The Natural Order Hypothesis states that students

> acquire (not learn) grammatical structures in a predictable order; that is, certain grammatical structures tend to be acquired early and others late ...the order is not rigidly obeyed by every acquirer; there is some individual variation. There is significant agreement among acquirers, however, and we can definitely speak of an average order of acquisition (pp. 56-57).

Given the existence of an average order of acquisition, it behooves us to diagnose where our students are in their acquisition and teach developmental skills appropriate to their acquisition level. In my experiences, if children are taught a given segment of language before they are ready to acquire it -- incorporate it into their own language system -- they don't acquire it. Hence their time has been diverted from something they could have acquired. Indeed, at the beginning levels of acquisition, young children are frequently intimidated by being taught language beyond them. Conversely, teaching children something they have already well integrated into their own language is also a waste of time. A 10-year-old student with an oral receptive English language age of 5 years, for example, would not acquire more language from any of the instructional lessons described in this paper. Diagnosing, grouping and instructing by broad level of language acquisition is necessary to ensure appropriate input and growth for each student.

Hence I believe ESL instruction is more effective in promoting beginning second language growth if part of the instruction includes intentionally sequenced unanalyzed wholes appropriate to each student's acquisition level.

FOOTNOTES

1. literally: What is your name?

2. literally: Name Mr. is what?

3. literally: Name your (m.) what?

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